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ABSTRACT

To understand why the general situation of young Hispanic Americans is critical it is necessary to consider some demographic characteristics of the Hispanic population and examine the need for reform in their educational experiences. The impact of some current initiatives in the Mid-Atlantic region are discussed, and some alternative reforms are suggested. Hispanics are the youngest and fastest growing segment of the U.S. population and in the Mid-Atlantic region in particular. A number of factors contribute to low academic achievement among Hispanic-American youth, and a high dropout rate is a further indication that Hispanics are not faring well in school. Limited English proficiency is only one aspect of the situation, which is compounded by a number of social factors. A survey of education reforms in the Mid-Atlantic region suggests that many reforms have been fashioned as if the nation were homogeneously white and middle class. A look at proposed alternative reforms indicates that these may also ignore the special needs of at-risk students. Fine tuning reform efforts will be necessary if the needs of Hispanic-American youth are to be met. Three tables summarize reform efforts. (Contains 21 references.) (SLD)

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THE EDUCATION REFORM MOVEMENT: IMPACT ON HISPANIC YOUTH IN THE MID-ATLANTIC REGION

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
INTRODUCTION	1
DEMOGRAPHIC PROFILE OF HISPANICS	1
THE NEED FOR REFORMS IN THE SCHOOLING OF HISPANICS	4
Academic Achievement	4
Dropping Out	6
Language	8
CURRENT EDUCATION INITIATIVES IN THE MID-ATLANTIC REGION	9
ALTERNATIVE EDUCATION REFORMS	12
CONCLUSION	13
REFERENCES	16

THE EDUCATION REFORM MOVEMENT: IMPACT ON HISPANIC YOUTH IN THE MID-ATLANTIC REGION

The experience of secondary schooling for most Hispanics is not preparing them to assume productive and satisfying adult lives. Recent studies give us a picture of the severity of the problem:

- Almost 50 percent of the Hispanics who took the U.S. Education Department's "High School and Beyond" achievement tests in both 1980 and 1982 scored in the lowest quartile of those tested (National Commission on Secondary Schooling for Hispanics, 1984, p. 32); and
- Forty percent of Hispanic 20 to 24 year-olds are not high school graduates and the comparable Puerto Rican figure is 46 percent (Bureau of the Census, 1985).

While we can disagree about the causes as well as the remedies for the social trauma these dreary statistics represent, we can be certain that the poor educational preparation Hispanic youths are receiving will affect their communities and cities in a costly and negative fashion unless a determined effort is made to reverse the situation. In order to understand why the situation is critical, we must first consider some demographic characteristics of the Hispanic population and then discuss the need for reform in the educational experience of Hispanic youth. In later sections, we will briefly review some current education initiatives in the Mid-Atlantic region, and assess their possible impact on the Hispanic students' low academic achievement and high drop-out rates. Finally, alternative reforms will also be suggested and considered.

Demographic Profile of Hispanics

Hispanics are the youngest and the fastest growing population in the country. The rapid growth is due to the youthfulness and the birth rate of

the group as well as to the continuing immigration of other Hispanics. The average white in this country is about 31 years old; the average black, 25; and the average Hispanic, 22. If one considers that the peak child-bearing years are from 21 to 29, it becomes clearer why the three groups will continue to have different growth patterns in the future. Without including Puerto Rico as a possible new state, Hispanics will outnumber blacks at some point between the years 2005 and 2015 (McNett, 1983).

But this is only part of the picture. Because of a steep decline in the overall national fertility rate from 3.7 in 1957 to 1.8 in 1982, seven million fewer young people will reach working age in the 1990s than did so in the 1970s. Hispanic and black youth, therefore, will constitute ever-increasing portions of successive youth cohorts for the forseeable future (Pifer, 1982). At the same time, the white portion of the national population will not only decline from 80 percent in 1980 to perhaps 65 percent in 2020, but also will grow steadily older (Davis, Haub, & Willette, 1983). As the population ages and greater numbers retire for longer periods of time, the need to avoid the waste of talent and productivity among smaller numbers of younger workers will become more dramatic.

While corporations are already spending considerable funds on basic remedial education for their entry-level employees (English, 1985), this trend will only grow unless there is a drastic improvement in schooling for all our youth. The economies of the Mid-Atlantic region and the nation are undergoing a series of structural changes that require more workers to process the attitudes and skills a solid high school education can provide. Just having a strong back or nimble fingers will no longer qualify workers

for entry-level jobs in an economy that is moving away from traditional manufacturing to service, technical, and information industries.

The potential growth in the demand for younger workers also foretells the continuation of large-scale immigration into this country regardless of what legislation may be passed. That is, we may gain some control over our borders but we are likely to continue to admit about a million immigrants a year into this country for the rest of the century. Because of worldwide population trends, the large bulk of the new immigrants will add to the number of Hispanics and racial minorities in this country. Already, all but two of the 25 largest school systems, including Philadelphia and Newark, have numerical majorities of minorities. Texas' school population is about 50 percent minority. By the end of the century, California is likely to have a majority of minorities in its total population.

The Mid-Atlantic states do not now contain large percentages of Hispanics. But Hispanics are among the most rapidly growing populations in these states, states which are projected to have only small overall gains in population in the next few decades, as well as declining school populations. Except for Newark, in which Hispanics were 19 percent of the population in 1980, the larger cities in the Mid-Atlantic region, Philadelphia and Baltimore, do not contain large percentages of Hispanics although the Philadelphia metropolitan area had over 115,000 Hispanics in 1980.

However, several smaller cities and towns in the region do contain significant numbers of Hispanics. For example, Reading, Lancaster, and Bethlehem in eastern Pennsylvania each had 10 percent or more. Larger cities, like Allentown and Harrisburg, had Hispanic populations of five

percent or more. The percentages for the New Jersey cities are higher: New Brunswick, 12 percent; Jersey City, 19 percent; Camden, 20 percent; Paterson, 29 percent; Passaic, 34 percent; Perth Amboy, 41 percent; and Union City and Hoboken, over 65 percent. The percentages for Delaware and Maryland are considerably smaller, although Wilmington (Delaware) had five percent and areas like Bethesda and Silver Spring (Maryland) had over five percent in 1980.

In some cities, then, the future of public education and the prosperity of commerce, industry, the arts, and the community generally will be linked to the fate of Hispanics. Thus, the need to invest in the preparation and development of Hispanic and black youth must go beyond equity and become one of societal self-interest. Minority youths must become well-informed citizens, cognizant consumers, and productive employees.

The Need for Reforms in the Schooling of Hispanics

The most apparent symptoms of Hispanics faring poorly in high school in recent years have been (1) their low academic achievement and (2) their high rates of dropping out. This section of the paper is devoted to defining the dimensions of these two problem areas and briefly indicating how current reforms in education in the region might affect them.

Academic Achievement

Some indicators of the low academic achievement of Hispanics who remain in high school and factors contributing to this problem are identified in the information that follows:

- Seventy-six percent of the Hispanics who took the High School and Beyond (HSB) achievement tests scored in the bottom half of the national results. Stated another way, nearly half of the same students scored in the lowest quartile of the national results;

- Only 17 percent of the Hispanic sophomores in the HSB sample reported above-average grades, compared to 27 percent of the national sample, while 40 percent reported below-average grades, compared to 29 percent of the national sample;

- Hispanic sophomores who took the HSB tests in 1980, and who retook the same tests in 1982, fell even further below the national norm on the second testing;

- Only 25 percent of the Hispanic HSB sample were in academic programs while the rest were in general (40 percent) or vocational education programs (35 percent);

- Hispanics in public high schools in October 1983 spent an average of 5.9 hours a week on homework, lagging behind the white average of 6.4 and the black average of 6.6 hours (U. S. Census Bureau, 1984); and

- By the last semester in high school, Hispanics in the HSB sample were taking fewer academic courses than any other student group.

Most Hispanics are not doing well academically because they are not learning what they should in school. How will the excellence reforms affect these students? What is often overlooked by observers of the excellence movement is that the group that will probably be most affected by these reforms will not be those who are already achieving well but the large mass of students who remain in school while not achieving well. These students do not necessarily see themselves as preparing for college work or even the world of work after high school. Most Hispanics fall into this category and, therefore, would probably be greatly affected by the proposed reforms.

It is this group of students who would most need to change their attitudes toward school and their school work habits in order to deal successfully with the reforms of the excellence movement. Likewise, it is the schooling of these students that will have to incur the most extensive changes for the excellence movement to succeed.

Before we turn to a discussion of these issues and the more intensive needs of drop-out prone Hispanics, here is a word of caution about extrapolating from national figures on Hispanics and drawing conclusions about Hispanics in the Mid-Atlantic region. The national figures for Puerto Ricans, who constitute the largest group of Hispanics in the northeastern states, indicate they are more likely to be found in academic programs than their Hispanic counterparts in other regions of the country and yet they achieve about the same or less than these other groups. The Puerto Rican experience may be somewhat similar to the experience reported by the College Board for blacks. For example, black seniors in 1980 were as likely as whites to have taken at least three years of math, but they were much less likely to have taken algebra, geometry, trigonometry, or calculus. Hence, blacks must have concentrated their coursework in areas like general or business math.

Dropping Out

A high rate of dropping out is the other major indication that Hispanics are not faring well in school. In numerous metropolitan areas, the media and others report alarming Hispanic drop-out rates: Los Angeles, 50 percent (Arreola, 1983); San Antonio, 23 percent (Vasquez, 1983); Miami, 32 percent (Martinez, 1984); Chicago, 70 percent (Shipp, 1984); and New

York, 80 percent (Maeroff, 1984). Unfortunately, drop-out figures from different localities often cannot be compared because of differences in how a drop-out is defined or how the data are collected. About the only general statements that can be made about these local data are that Hispanic rates are high and are usually the highest among all groups in the specific localities.

Drop-out data from the High School and Beyond survey appear in "Make Something Happen," a report of the Hispanic Policy Development Project. A drop out in this nationally representative survey is someone who was in school as a sophomore in the spring of 1980, but was no longer in school at the time of the first follow-up survey in the spring of 1982. The following rates are based on this definition.

Table 1

Drop-Out Rates

Overall National Rates		Hispanic Subgroup Rates	
Hispanic	18.7%	Puerto Rican	22.9%
Black	17.1%	Mexican American	21.2%
White	12.5%	Cuban American	19.4%
U.S. Average	13.7%	Other Hispanic	11.4%

Regional Hispanic rates also can be derived from the HSB data. The U.S. Census region that most closely corresponds to the area served by Research for Better Schools, Inc. is the Middle Atlantic region which contains the states of New York, New Jersey, and Pennsylvania. The Hispanic drop-out rate for this region is 19 percent.

It is important to realize that these figures do not include students who dropped out before the spring semester of the 10th grade. About 40

percent of all Hispanic students who leave school do so before reaching their sophomore year, according to a report prepared for the National Center for Education Statistics by Hirano-Nakanishi (1983).

How will the reforms affect the Hispanic drop-out situation in the Mid-Atlantic region? Will the reforms lower or exacerbate the high drop-out rates? In the short run, it is hard to see how the reforms can do anything but increase the rates. This is not to say that states will not try other reforms if higher rates can be traced to the current reforms. Apparently, it is the view of state policy makers that setting higher standards is more important for now than reducing drop-out rates and they are not yet convinced that the proposed reforms will cause even higher rates. In a way, they see this as a sort of experiment.

Language

One might well ask how the problem of language affects this situation. Isn't the problem of limited proficiency in English the main cause of low academic achievement and dropping out for Hispanics? A few comments on this topic are in order. Yes, language does play a part, but the situation is more complex than it appears. By the time Hispanics reach the ninth or tenth grade, their language difficulties in earlier years may have caused them to be retained a year or two in earlier grades. Hence, they are often behind their age contemporaries in school and ahead of their grade peers in physical and emotional development.[1] Combined with other factors such as poor grades and attraction to work, being overage frequently results in students dropping out of school. Yet, because the complexity of this

[1] Almost 25 percent of all Hispanics enter high school overage.

situation is not usually captured in surveys of drop outs, the language factor does not loom as large in the survey results.

Moreover, except for Hispanics who immigrate into the country as adolescents and now often receive some special language assistance, the latent and more obvious language problems of most Hispanics who stay in school are simply ignored or accommodated by the high schools they attend. Hispanics need more intensive English language study and they should also be encouraged to become interate in the Spanish language.[2]

What is so notable about these language problems is that while broadly accepted policies to address them still have not been developed, controversies over these issues have obscured the other problems Hispanics face in education.

Current Education Initiatives in the Mid-Atlantic Region

In this section of the paper we will look briefly at initiatives that have been enacted or are being proposed in the Mid-Atlantic states. This list and a later one on reform alternatives are composed of information drawn from surveys of state officials conducted by Education Week (2/6/85), the National Commission on Excellence in Education (1984), and the Children's Defense Fund (2/85).

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[2] Only 4.4 percent of 1982 Hispanic seniors in the High School and Beyond sample studied three or more years of Spanish -- almost the same as the 3.6 percent of the entire national sample who did likewise.

Table 2

State Education Reforms in Mid-Atlantic Region

Key:
Y = Yes; NR = None Reported; UC = Under Consideration

	DE	MD	NJ	PA	Y
Increase Graduation Requirements	Y	Y	Y	Y	4
Student Evaluation/Testing	Y	Y	Y	Y	4
Add Instructional Time	Y	UC[3]	NR[4]	NR	1
Statewide Assessment	NR	NR[3]	NR[4]	Y	1
School Discipline	UC	Y	Y	UC	2
Promotional Gates Tests	Y	NR	NR	NR	1
Limit Extracurriculars/Athletics	Y	NR	NR	NR	1
Require Exit Test	UC	Y	Y	NR	2
Raise College Admission Standards	NR	Y	NR	NR	1
Total Y responses	5	5	4	3	
Total UC responses	2	1	0	1	
Total NR responses	2	3	5	5	
Revise Teacher Certification	Y	NR	Y	Y	3
Aid Prospective Teachers	Y	Y	UC[5]	Y	3
Require Competency Tests	Y	NR	NR[5]	Y	2
Salary Increases	Y	UC	UC	NR	1
Merit Pay/Career Ladders	UC	NR	Y	UC	1
Professional Development/Teachers	Y	Y	Y	UC	3
Professional Development/ Administrators	Y	Y	Y	Y	4
Total Y responses	6	3	4	4	
Total UC responses	1	1	2	2	
Total NR responses	0	3	1	1	

[3]Editor's note: Although the footnoted areas indicate that no reform alternatives were reported, both Maryland and New Jersey have reforms underway in the area of statewide assessment, and in New Jersey, teacher competency testing also is being established.

[4]Ibid.

[5]Ibid.

Most reforms listed are derived from what is called the excellence movement. Many were originally recommended in A Nation at Risk, which was released in the spring of 1983 as the report of the National Commission on Excellence in Education. As the reader can see, the Mid-Atlantic states, led by Delaware, have approved or are considering initiatives in several of the areas. All four states appear to be stressing the upgrading of the teaching force through a variety of means more than efforts to instill more academic rigor for students, especially in the cases of New Jersey and Pennsylvania.

The original suggestions for these reforms were influenced not by research on exemplary practice or schools but by the concerns of the excellence movement over low standards, diluted curricular, and diffused purposes in our nation's schools. These concerns were expressed by corporate leaders, politicians, and others from outside the educational establishment.

The overwhelming concern, indeed, fear of these leaders in the early 1980s was that the United States was becoming second-rate in economic competition with Japan. Thus, education was seen as an investment to increase economic productivity. The call then was for quick and dramatic action to reform the central core of education with little regard for existing research; for the reforms already in place; for how these new initiatives would be funded, implemented and assessed; or even for what the educational establishment thought of the proposed reforms. Most of the educational establishment has come to view the reforms as a mixed blessing. The reforms have brought new expectations, energy, and resources to education, but also lead to top-down mandates that still need to be

transformed into concrete practices and embraced by front-line teachers and their supervisors.

Alternative Education Reforms

A major criticism leveled at the initiatives pursued or supported by the excellence movement is that the initiatives are being fashioned as if the nation's student population were homogenously white and middle class. Initiatives to meet the needs of at-risk students and students from populations previously excluded from the educational mainstream have not been enacted as often as the excellence-type reforms. Table 3 lists initiatives and reforms recommended to meet the needs of at-risk students. Most are based on effective schools research and correspond to the recommendations made by the National Commission on Secondary Schooling for Hispanics in "Make Something Happen."

All but two of the listed items should be self-explanatory. According to the Children's Defense Fund survey, Innovative Programs/Incentives are needed to support school improvement projects and other improvement schemes. Planning Requirements are needed to develop long or short-term school/district improvement plans and/or satisfy accountability measures. Significant in this regard is New Jersey's Urban Initiative which provides assistance to 56 districts in program development and planning and concentrated help to three urban districts implementing three to five-year, comprehensive school renewal plans based on specific objectives. Not surprisely, because few states have, none of the Mid-Atlantic states have adopted drop-out prevention programs. Such programs emphasize alternative education practices which have been found to be effective in retaining drop-out prone students.

Table 3

Alternative Education Initiatives in the Mid-Atlantic Region

Key:
Y = Yes; NR = None Reported; UC = Under Consideration

	DE	MD	NJ	PA	Y
Remediation/Compensatory Education	Y	Y	Y	Y	4
Improve Attendance	NR	NR	NR[6][7]	Y	1
Drop-Out Prevention	NR	NR	NR[7]	NR	0
Mandatory Kindergarten	Y	NR	NR	NR	1
Pre-School Initiatives	NR	UC	Y	NR	1
Innovative Programs/Incentives	NR	Y	UC	Y	2
Parent/Community Involvement	UC	NR	NR	Y	1
Planning Requirements	NR	NR	Y	NR[8]	1
School Climate	NR	Y	NR[9]	UC	1
Smaller Classes	Y	NR	NR	NR	1
Vocational Education/Job Training	NR	Y	Y	NR	2
Total Y responses	3	4	4	4	
Total UC responses	1	1	1	1	
Total NR responses	7	6	6	6	

Conclusion

In comparing the actions of the Mid-Atlantic states on the reforms and alternative initiatives lists, it is clear these states, not unlike the majority of the states, have adopted fewer of the alternative initiatives.

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[6]Editor's note: Although the footnoted areas indicate that no reform alternatives were reported, New Jersey has initiated reforms in the areas of improving attendance, drop-out prevention, and school climate, and Pennsylvania has addressed the planning requirements area.

[7]Ibid.

[8]Ibid.

[9]Ibid.

But it is also clear that these states have rejected some of the reform recommendations such as lengthening the school year and, except for Delaware, limiting extracurricular activities on the basis of poor grades. The basic policy thrust has been to raise standards for both teachers and students. What we cannot determine from these data is the extent to which alternative-type initiatives are already in place because of their adoption by local schools and communities.

While it's still too early to assess these reforms in general or to determine their effects on at-risk students, the concern expressed most often by advocates for at-risk students is that the excellence-type reforms, especially higher standards, will push these students out of school and accelerate their already high drop-out rates.

Most Hispanics will need to take more academic courses to meet the higher standards for graduation, but they also will require better instruction from well-qualified teachers to succeed. No doubt the emphasis on improving the teaching force in these states will lead to better instruction in time. However, the lack of additional resources, beyond those for remediation, and of provisions for improvement programs at the school site in these reforms makes one question the ultimate success of these reforms for at-risk students.

Little attention has been paid in this paper to the socioeconomic characteristics of many Hispanics in order to remain in accord with the basic finding from the effective schools literature that it is school characteristics rather than student characteristics that determine the quality of education. Nevertheless, some important socioeconomic distinctions between some Hispanics and others should be noted here, if only to strengthen the argument for certain kinds of programs.

Because only 46 percent of Hispanic adults (25 years or older) are high school graduates compared to 72 percent of non-Hispanics (U.S. Census, 1985), Hispanic youth are in much greater need of academic counseling and career guidance, starting in middle schools if they are to meet the new demands. Drop-out prone students, especially, need smaller, more cohesive schools that integrate social supports and well-defined academic programs (Foley, 1985). Improved vocational education and part-time job programs that are integrated with the new academic thrust are also needed (National Commission on Secondary Schooling for Hispanics, 1984).

In 1982, about 45 percent of all Puerto Rican families were headed by a woman with no husband present, compared to an average for non-Hispanic families of 15 percent. About a third of the Puerto Rican families had one worker and another third had no workers. Understandably, the poverty rate for Puerto Rican families is 42 percent. Because of these grim statistics and the knowledge that pre-school programs have had quite positive long-term effects for disadvantaged children, pre-school programs and kindergarten for these children should be widely adopted.

In spite of the reservations raised here, advocates for at-risk students should work within the overall reform movement as long as the possibility for further reforms exists. We need to be involved in the assessment of the current reforms, especially as it affects at-risk students. State policy makers would do well to follow the lead of the governor of Delaware who plans a survey of public school parents and teachers at the end of this school year to assess educational reform. The large pieces of reform are now in place but we will need to fine-tune them during the next few years to meet the needs of Hispanic youth.

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